

Proper 19, September 16, 2012

Nigel Taber-Hamilton

As I read through today's readings I was greatly struck by the one from the Letter of James: "How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire!.....the tongue [is] a restless evil full of deadly poison.....the tongue [is] a world of iniquity". I want to say to James, tongue in cheek (so to speak!): "tell us how you really feel!"

But can you also say "ripped from today's headlines"?! That old adage that "sticks and stones may break my bones but names can never hurt me" has never been more wrong. The truth is that words can be very hurtful, very destructive, can incite people to do evil things, either because they agree with those words – think "Adolf Hitler" and the "Final Solution", or because they disagree – think the radical Islamists who have murdered four of our diplomats in Lybia and tried to sack our embassies in several middle-eastern countries.

There's real irony here, because it turns out that the movie in question was made by extremist Coptic Christians – a branch of Christianity that is found primarily in – of all places – Egypt. It's beginning to look as if we Americans have been dragged into a conflict quite intentionally by the words of those whose agenda is quite clearly a self-interested anti-Islamic struggle.

How should we, as people of faith, respond to the fact that others within our community of faith – fellow Christians – are responsible?

And there's a more personal question for us in this: how should we respond when other Christians publically espouse a view of Christian faith that not only differs from our own but opposes it?

In other, similar situations I've heard phrases like "turn the other cheek" and "go the extra mile" used. The thing is they don't mean exactly what we think they mean!

In the ancient world, how a slave owner struck a slave, or a member of the elite class struck someone from a lower class, expressed both authority and dominance – not only the striking but the way you struck or were struck sent a message. As an elite person you only used your right hand (because the left was only used for "unclean purposes") and only the back of your hand, not the open right hand when striking someone "beneath you". To use the open hand would have sent a message of equality, even if also of disagreement.

So if, when struck, the lower class person or slave, "turned the other cheek", the discipliner was faced with a dilemma: to treat the person as an equal – by using an open right hand – or to stop the beating.

In either case the persecuted person was in effect **demanding equality** – forcing either an open right hand or an end to the beating. Now that's a much more active and, in some ways, dangerous action than we now understand that phrase to mean – **a peaceful but direct challenge** to the other to engage as equals and not as oppressor and oppressed.

The same sort of thing's true with **"going the extra mile"**. Roman military law said that any Roman soldier could press a civilian into service carrying his heavy gear for a mile. A mile was chosen because in the heat of a Mediterranean climate carrying heavy equipment for a mile at a trot was the assumed physical limit of a civilian. The Romans wanted to avoid their pressed servants from collapsing under the load – they weren't in the business of injuring or killing civilians unnecessarily. It wasn't that they cared for these pressed civilian's well-being; they simply didn't want to provoke revolt by killing or severely injuring members of the local population, whose cooperation – even if begrudging – they ultimately counted on. So Roman military law said that if a soldier forced a civilian to carry his gear for more than a mile he could suffer severe discipline from his Centurion. You can imagine the increasing nervousness of a Roman soldier when the civilian he's pressed into service keeps pushing on beyond the first mile. Again, it was **a peaceful but direct challenge** to the sense of authority and dominance the soldier felt, and, in the end, a subtle demand to be treated differently – **as an equal**.

So I'm going to answer my own question – how should we respond when others act and speak on our behalf in ways that are counter to our Christian values – the invitation for us is to respond in at least two distinct ways: to **respond peacefully** but also to **challenge the actions and preconceptions of those who seek to speak for us by proclaiming our own truth**.

In our day and age – and in the context of other Christians speaking for us – this means that, in addition to defending civil discourse, and rejecting inflammatory language **we are called on to oppose** – with our own words and actions and based on our core values as Christians – **those who seek to incite, divide, or oppress, or to speak on our behalf in language and beliefs that are counter to our own**.

In the case of the anti-Muslim movie our response is straightforward – we need to say that for us as Episcopal Christians, inter-faith dialogue is a core value, and we reject inflammatory, hate-filled speech directed at other religions, **while also** rejecting the savage response of extremist Islamists – who don't represent their faith either – to that speech.

To that there is, however, only an interim "Amen".

It gets harder for us when we turn back from looking out beyond our national borders and to the great social issues of our time that continue to divide Christians in our nation. What should we do and say when other Christians express opinions about topics that differ from our own? What should we do and say when other Christians denigrate and exclude women or sexual minorities AND tell us we should do the same? What about R-74?

But wait! Isn't that "political"? Aren't we prohibited from engaging in political discourse if we don't want to lose our 501 (c) 3 tax exempt status? The short answer is "no"! The **only way** any faith community risks its tax-exempt status is if it acts to contravenen what's called the 1954 Federal "Johnson Amendment". The I.R.S. interprets that amendment by describing 501(c) 3 non-profit charities - such as ourselves - as a group which "does not participate in, or intervene in (including the publishing or distributing of statements), any **political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for public office**." (IRS rr. 07-41 pt 1, sect 501.26). We can't

endorse or oppose a CANDIDATE. That's it. So to believe that we are not allowed to speak out in public in the political arena on issues important to us as Christians that reflect our values is to claim that we do not have the protection of the First Amendment. Such a belief would silence us as Christians. It is NOT TRUE.

And all you have to do is to look at how many Churches of all stripes are engaged in the public square, supporting or opposing the issues of our day, to realize that we have the right to speak freely on the great issues of the day.

Responding to a curse with a blessing (Luke 6:28; Romans 12:14), returning good for evil (1 Peter 2:20), loving in the face of hatred (Romans 12:16-20), none of these things also prevents us from speaking up and of acting on behalf of our faith.

We do have a voice and we should use it. Always we should speak out of our core values as Christians – which come from both Jesus and Paul – and which center around love without restriction; a commitment to justice for the poor, the lost, the lonely, the homeless; and a commitment to **a radical equality** that sees no distinction between different cultures, different religious perspectives, no distinction based on gender (Gal 3: 28), on sexual orientation, on age, **or on anything**; and a commitment to community. That's true freedom!

Jesus reminds us in today's gospel that it won't be easy. He also tells us there's no other way: Love, Justice, Equality, Community, Freedom. These are our core values as Christians. We now live in an age when their proclamation is seldom heard from faith communities.

Silence is not an option! Amen.